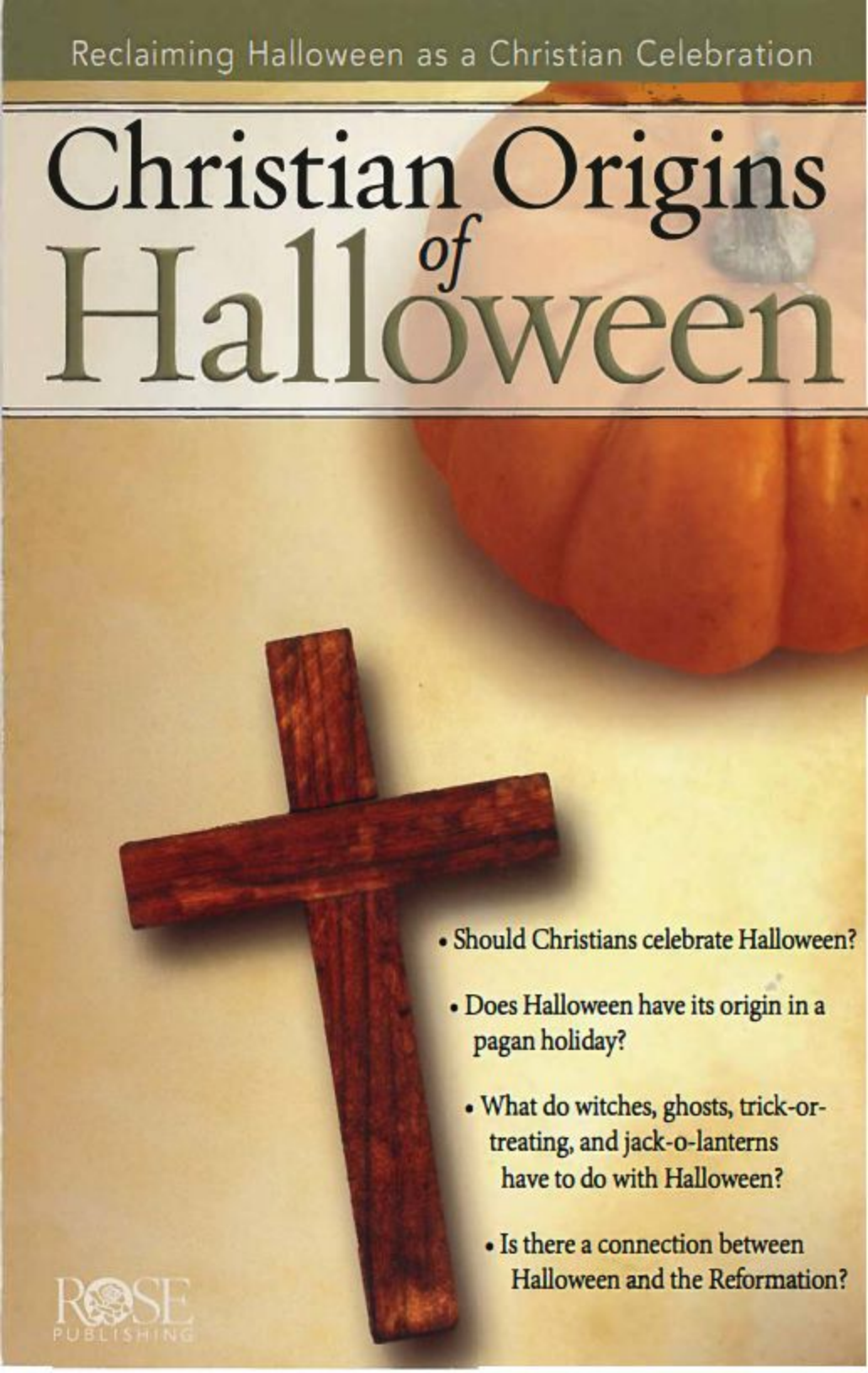
Reclaiming Halloween as a Christian Celebration

Christian Origins of Halloween



- Should Christians celebrate Halloween?
- Does Halloween have its origin in a pagan holiday?
- What do witches, ghosts, trick-or-treating, and jack-o-lanterns have to do with Halloween?
- Is there a connection between Halloween and the Reformation?

ROSE PUBLISHING

HALLOWEEN HISTORY

1. Halloween *and* All Saints' Day

The name *Halloween* is a blending of the words *All Hallows' Eve* or *Evening* (referring to the evening before All Saints' Day on November 1). The term *hallow* means "holy"—for example, we recite it in the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father who art in heaven, *hallowed* be thy name" (Matthew 6:9 KJV).

Early in church history, Christians began to celebrate people who they considered outstanding in holiness—specifically those who were martyred for their faith. However, with time, the growing number of men and women who were killed for being Christians made it impossible to assign a separate celebration for each one. Thus, various churches made an effort to select a common day to commemorate all of these "saints."

Some churches celebrated the "saints" on the Sunday after Pentecost (Orthodox churches continue to celebrate the Sunday of All Saints on this day), while others chose the Friday after Easter. On May 13, 609 or 610 AD, Pope Boniface IV dedicated the Pantheon in Rome (originally built to honor all the gods of ancient Rome) to the Christian saints, and he established this date as a yearly celebration.

Over a century later, sometime between 731 and 741 AD, the date for commemorating the saints was changed to November 1. All Saints' Day (also called All Hallows' Day) was formally added to the church calendar in AD 835. By this time, Christians recognized as "saints" not only the martyrs but also the confessors (those who had "confessed" their faith by exceptional holiness but were not martyred).

Who Are The Saints?

It should be noted that the New Testament repeatedly uses the word *saints* to refer to all believers. However, with time, the term came to apply more specifically to "heroes of the faith." After the Reformation, Protestants have taken care to identify that all Christians are saints. Thus, the term "saints" will be used in quotes when it refers only to heroes of the faith.

2. History *of* Samhain (Pronounced sow-in; "sow" rhymes with "cow.")

A popular contemporary notion is that Halloween originated with a pagan holiday called *Samhain*. The fact that All Saints' Day and Samhain both fall on November 1 has led many people to draw a connection between the two—claiming in particular that Samhain influenced the establishment of All Saints' Day. But let's explore this idea.

MYTH: Halloween, or more specifically All Saints' Day, was established for the purpose of Christianizing a pagan holiday called *Samhain*.

TRUTH: Halloween is distinctly Christian in origin.

Samhain was an ancient pagan festival celebrated in the Northern Celtic regions (particularly Ireland and Scotland). There were no written records among the Northern Celtic people prior to their Christianization in the fifth century, so no information is known about the holiday with any certainty.

In order to learn anything about Samhain, we are forced to rely on Northern Celtic folklore recorded in the tenth century and later. From this literature, we learn that Samhain marked a change of season more than anything else. In fact, the name *Samhain* is derived from an Old Irish word that roughly means "summer's end."[1] With the onset of a new season, increasingly long and cold nights drew people around their hearth fires. Samhain served as the perfect setting for fairies, elves, and spirits to appear in stories; it was also the time of year that mythic kings and heroes were said to have died.

Despite the fact that nothing is really known about the pre-Christian pagan practices associated with Samhain, some scholars assert that the church established All Saints' Day in an effort to Christianize the pagan festival. There are several reasons to disagree with this claim:

- The celebration of Samhain was a tradition limited to the Northern Celtic regions (particularly Ireland and Scotland). By the time that All Saints' Day came to be associated with November 1, Christianity had been well established in this region for at least 300 years. There is no indication that ancient pagan practices persisted on Samhain in a way that concerned Christian leaders.
- Even if remnants of pagan practices remained in the remote parts of Christian lands (the Northern Celtic regions), they were probably not of particular concern to the Christian leadership in Rome (which was 1500 miles away across land and sea).

- It is quite possible that November 1 was chosen so that the many pilgrims who traveled to Rome to commemorate the saints "could be fed more easily after the harvest than in the spring."[2]
- Irish Christians originally celebrated the saints on April 20. So before the establishment of All Saints' Day, it is more likely that they remembered their dead in April than during Samhain. Furthermore, there is no concrete evidence to suggest that Samhain had any association with the dead.[3]
- The idea that Samhain was a festival of the dead was popularized by Sir James Frazer in his famous work *The Golden Bough, A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890). However, Frazer seems to have confused the traditions associated with All Souls' Day (Nov. 2) with ancient Samhain practices.[4] It is more likely that the Christian holiday of All Saints' Day (as well as All Souls' Day, which will be described in the next section) introduced a focus on the dead to Samhain rather than the reverse.

Among the Northern Celtic people, it appears that three key elements combined to create the nature of Halloween:

1. A change of season to a darker and colder time of year.
2. A time associated with supernatural storytelling.
3. The Christian addition of a holiday that focused on the dead.

Though Celtic traditions associated with Samhain may have influenced the *character* of Halloween, there is no evidence to suggest that Christian leaders were influenced by Samhain in either the establishment of All Saints' Day or the selection of its date. It was initially created as a time for Christians to remember and celebrate the dead. Unfortunately, among Christians, a great deal of superstition and confusion came to be associated with the dead, and this added the final component to creating a "scary" Halloween.

October 31 - November 2: Church Celebration of Hallowmas

Though the original use of the term *Hallowmas* referred specifically to Nov. 1, it gradually developed a broader definition that included three days: Oct. 31 (Halloween, The Eve of All Saints' Day), Nov. 1 (All Saints' Day) and Nov. 2 (All Souls' Day)—all understood to be interconnected. Similar traditions could be celebrated on any one of these days depending on the local Christian community.

3. Misunderstanding *the* Afterlife

All Souls' Day and Purgatory

So why did superstition and fear come to be associated with a Christian celebration of the dead? These elements were likely rooted in a misunderstanding of the afterlife.

About the same time that All Saints' Day was formally established (AD 835), Amalarius of Metz (died 850), a liturgical writer from France who recorded and influenced worship traditions in the church, wrote: "After the office of the saints I have inserted the office for the dead; for many pass out of this world without at once being admitted into the company of the blessed."[5]

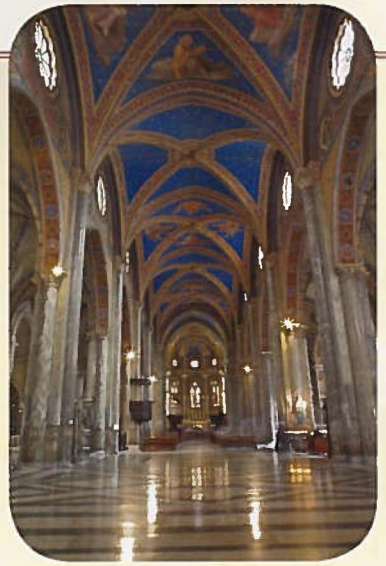
It should be noted that during the Reformation (about 700 years later), the teaching that believers do not immediately enter God's presence when they die was rejected by most Protestants. However, in the meantime, Amalarius's text probably influenced St. Odilo (died 1049), an abbot in France, who directed his congregation to honor Nov. 2 as a day to pray for the souls of the dead (that they would be freed from a purgatorial state and allowed to enter God's presence). The practice spread, and over the next two or three centuries, All Souls' Day became common to church calendars.

The concept of purgatory was made dogma at the 1274 Council of Lyons. The council wrote that souls who have not made "satisfaction [for sins] by worthy fruits of penance . . . are cleansed after death by purgatorial or purifying punishments." Furthermore, the council taught that these punishments could be relieved for oneself (or for those who had died) through "the sacrifices of Masses, prayers, alms, and other duties of piety."

Though the Roman Catholic Church was careful not to define the nature of purgatory, wild and terrible descriptions developed among Christians. Furthermore, over the next several centuries, a tremendous amount of "energy went into understanding purgatory, teaching people about it, and in particular, arranging life in the present in relation to it."[6] All Saints'

It is difficult to identify when Christians began making distinctions among their dead, but it is clear that throughout the Middle Ages, they differentiated between:

1. Christians who have died and are now standing in the presence of God.
2. Christians who have died and are in a purgatorial state, being cleansed of their sins and fitted for heaven.
3. Christians (still alive) on earth.



and All Souls' Day were both intimately tied to remembering the Christian dead and considering their state. It became standard practice during these days for Christians to call on the "saints" for help in relieving loved ones from the punishments of purgatory.

Conducting Masses and praying for those in purgatory became "a major feature of medieval piety,"[7] and the practice of selling indulgences to help reduce time in purgatory for loved ones (or for oneself) is one of the issues that moved Martin Luther to write his famous list of criticisms of the Church, called "the *Ninety-Five Theses*." This writing helped to start the Reformation, when many Christians left the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Christianity began.

What is an Indulgence?

In Roman Catholic doctrine, an indulgence is a reduction of the *temporal* punishment due to sin.

The Roman Catholic Church distinguishes between *temporal* punishment and *eternal* punishment (hell), clarifying that though the Christian's *guilt* of sin is already forgiven by Christ, the *punishment* for sin must be endured in this life or the life to come, and the *stain* of sin must be purged or purified.

To issue an indulgence, the church draws from a *treasury of merit*—a collection of good works done by Christ, Mary, and the "saints" in excess of what was required of them. These works are applied to Christians through indulgences.

4. Reformation Day

It was not a coincidence that Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of All Saints' Church (also called "Castle Church") on October 31, 1517. This was the eve on which Christians were particularly focused on their dead and appealed to the saints on their behalf; indulgences were an intimate part of these practices. The *Ninety-Five Theses* are widely regarded as the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. Thus, October 31 is recognized by many Protestants as Reformation Day.

Some key points of Luther's theses:

1. Indulgences were giving people a false assurance of salvation, leading them to overlook true repentance and contrition: "It is not in accordance with Christian doctrine to preach and teach that those who buy off souls, or purchase confessional licenses, have no need to repent of their own sins" (thesis 35).
2. Indulgences were being sold for financial gain: "When the money clinks in the bottom of the chest avarice and greed increase" (thesis 28).
3. Indulgences were said to have power over the dead and the ability to free souls from purgatory: "There is no divine authority for preaching that the soul flies out of purgatory immediately the money clinks in the bottom of the chest" (thesis 27).

It should be noted that many Catholics also criticized the abuses highlighted by Luther about indulgences, and in 1567, Pope Pius V eliminated payments in the granting of indulgences.[8]

MYTH: It is a coincidence that Halloween and Reformation Day are both on October 31.

TRUTH: Reformation Day traces its origin to Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* (which were posted on October 31). These theses specifically disputed beliefs about the dead and the afterlife that were intimately tied to Halloween.

5. Afterlife *in the* Protestant View

The Protestant view of the afterlife rejects the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory and views all Christians as either living on earth or as living in the presence of God in heaven. Though the works of all believers will surely be judged and though there may be a great variance in the degree of our eternal rewards, "heroes of the faith" and other Christian souls all enter the presence of the Lord immediately after death. For as Jesus says to the criminal on the cross, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Christ died not only for the guilt of our sin but also the punishment of sin (Isa. 53:5–6). This is not to say that there is no temporal punishment for sin; surely we endure consequences for our sin in this world, and God takes care to discipline us (Heb. 12:5–7). However, the notion that further punishments await us in the afterlife and that our sin requires "satisfaction by [our] worthy fruits" (Council of Lyons, 1274) or by the works of the "saints" (in excess of what was required of them), seems to dilute the good news of the gospel, as well as the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross.

It comes as no surprise that death is mysterious and terrifying to non-believers, but for the Christian, there is no place for fear and superstition regarding the afterlife. Our only "fear" should be awe, wonder, and reverence of the God who "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:10–12).

In the end, many Protestants rejected Halloween not because of any supposed pagan origins but rather due to theological differences with Roman Catholicism. Regardless, various Protestant communities maintained some Halloween traditions (like "souling"—a practice addressed in the section on "trick-or-treating"). Over time, both Protestant and Catholic immigrants, particularly from the British Isles, brought their traditions, as well as their theology, to North America. These immigrants helped to form the symbols, associations, and practices of the modern American Halloween that will be explored in the next section.

MYTH: After death, many Christians will face fearful punishments.

TRUTH: Those who place themselves "in Christ" through faith have nothing to fear. For Christ took upon himself the punishment for our sin.

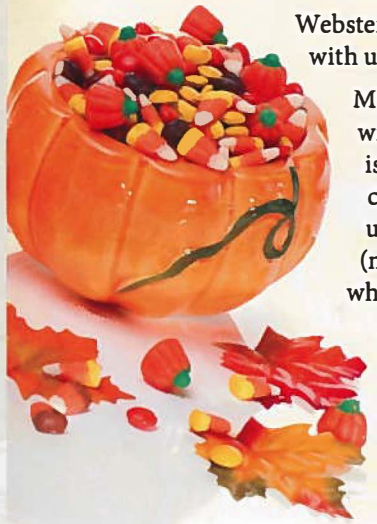
Witches: What Does *the* Bible Say About Them?

Witches most likely came to be connected with Halloween for two reasons:

1. Witches and their "craft" were associated with darkness, and Halloween marked a change in season to an increasingly dark time of year.
2. Witches had a supposed ability to communicate with the dead, and Halloween was established specifically as a holiday to remember the dead.

God expressly forbids the practice of witchcraft:

"Let no one be found among you . . . who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD" (Deut. 18:10–12a).



Webster's broadly defines a "witch" as one who "is credited with usually malignant supernatural powers."

Many modern proponents of witchcraft, especially within the Wicca movement, claim that their magic is innocent and harmless. Yet, even witchcraft that claims to be "good" or use only "white magic" usually seeks its source of power from the spirit world (making one extremely vulnerable to demonic spirits whose intentions are never good).

MYTH: Some forms of witchcraft, such as "white magic," are innocent and harmless.

TRUTH: God forbids any form of witchcraft. Seeking power apart from God makes one extremely vulnerable to dangerous and evil powers.

Ghosts: Are They Real?

The word *ghost* is generally understood to refer to a disembodied soul. In regard to its use in the Bible, many English translations use the phrase "giving up the ghost" to refer to death (Gen. 25:8; 35:29; 49:33; Matt. 27:50, etc., KJV). When believers die physically, the Bible teaches that our ghost (our soul) departs to dwell with Christ until he returns and clothes us with new glorious bodies to live on a new earth (see Phil. 1:21–24, 3:20–21; 2 Pet. 3:13).

The belief that souls don't immediately enter heaven or hell has led some people to believe that they remain to "haunt" or even work out their purgatorial punishments on earth. Many in the modern paranormal community insist that ghosts are trapped souls in need of help to cross over to the other side. This idea of a "trapped" or "earthbound" human soul is not found anywhere in the Bible.

The Bible does record instances of the dead making appearances, but they are unique exceptions, granted by God for specific reasons. 1 Samuel 28 records how the prophet Samuel appears to King Saul (who used a medium, or a "witch," to "bring up" Samuel's spirit from the dead). Samuel asks, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" (1 Sam. 28:15). Far from being a trapped or earthbound spirit, Samuel suggests that his eternal rest was interrupted. Furthermore, God uses Samuel for a clear purpose—to deliver a message of judgment on Saul.

The Bible implies that, without God's intervention, the dead do not return to earth. When speaking of his dead infant son, King David says, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Sam. 12:23). In Luke 16:19–31, Jesus tells a story of a rich man who dies and is suffering in hell. The rich man asks for someone among the dead to go warn his brothers about hell so that they can repent, but the request is denied: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

In Deuteronomy 18:11, God expressly forbids us to consult the dead. It opens the door to deceptive spirits. If "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14), why not expect his demons in any form—not only a shadowy or terrifying figure, but an innocent child or a departed loved one? Satan's ultimate goal is to deceive.

MYTH: Ghosts are trapped souls (or earthbound spirits) who are trying to cross over to the "other side."

TRUTH: The idea of a trapped human soul is not found anywhere in the Bible.

Trick-or-Treating: What *is* Its Origin?

The strongest case for the origin of trick-or-treating in North America comes from the British Isles:

The "Treat"

During Hallowmas (Oct. 31 through Nov. 2) in the pre-Reformation British Isles, there existed a popular tradition called "souling." The poor would move from door to door asking for food and drink in return for a prayer for the dead (to relieve their souls of purgatorial punishment). It was common for households to give out baked bread or "soul cakes." Other frequent gifts were apples, nuts, ale, and coins.

Among Protestants, the Reformation largely brought an end to the practice of praying for souls in purgatory. However, even in Protestant regions "souling remained an important occasion for soliciting food and money from rich neighbors" in preparation for the coming cold and dark months.[9]

It was common throughout the British Isles for people to go "souling" in disguise. In some regions, the costumed visitors might even conduct a mini-play for homeowners that portrayed local legends or religious themes. Furthermore, churches throughout greater Europe celebrated All Saints' Day with "processions in which parishioners dressed up as saints, angels and devils."[10] These traditions were probably the predecessors of our modern Halloween costumes.

The "Trick"

According to one historian, "Goblins, imps, fairies and trolls were thought to do a lot of mischief on Halloween in the British Isles. . . . For centuries, anonymous mischief was expected on October 31."[11] As a result, Halloween night was a favorite for energetic youth who were fond of practical jokes and pranks—costumes helped to ensure their anonymity.

Another historian records:

> Doors were blocked with carts, or attacked with a fusillade of turnips. Ploughs and carts were carried off and hidden; gates were taken off their hinges and thrown into a neighboring ditch or pond; horses were led from the stables and left in the fields a few miles away.[12]

In neighboring Ireland, "Halloween begging always involved a masquerade and some sort of good-natured bribe."[13] Such traditions were easily imported to North America, and it appears that the term "trick or treat" grew out of a friendly threat to play a prank on anyone who refused to give a treat.

Jack-o-Lanterns: Why Do We Decorate *with* Them?

In the British Isles, the term *jack-o-lantern* originally referred to a night watchman or a man with a lantern. It was also used to describe the phenomenon of strange light flickering over swamps or bogs that had the appearance of a person carrying a lantern. Scientists call this *ignis fatuus* or "fool's fire"—possibly a spontaneous combustion of gas produced by decaying matter. For centuries, people believed these to be "souls of the dead, wandering interminably and leading men astray." [14]

The first known use of the term *jack-o-lantern* to refer to a carved vegetable lantern was in 1837 America.[15] The tradition of carving lanterns probably came from the British Isles where there was a long tradition of using turnips, beets, and other vegetables for this purpose. These immigrants to North America would have found the large, native pumpkin especially well suited for carving.

While people in the British Isles likely used their carved lanterns for "souling" and other outdoor activities in the fall, there does not appear to have been any particular association with Halloween. This connection seems to have developed in North America and was first recorded in an 1886 Canadian newspaper.[16]

NOTES

1 Rogers, Nicholas. *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night.* Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 11. Some scholars dispute the etymology of the word and claim that it had a root meaning "assembly."

2 Weiser, Francis X. *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs.* Deus Books, 1963 (original 1952), p. 188.

3 Rogers, Nicholas. *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night.* Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 19.

4 Ibid., p. 19.

5 Butler, Alban (edited, revised, and supplemented by Herbert Thurston, SJ, and Donald Attwater). *Lives of the Saints,* Vol. 4. Quoting Amalarius of Metz from "De ordine antiphonarii" (Oct., Nov., and Dec.). P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1956.

6 Wright, N. T. *For All the Saints? Remembering the Christian Departed.* Morehouse Publishing, 2003, p. 6.

7 Ibid., p. 7.

8 Kent, William. "Indulgences." *The Catholic Encyclopedia.* Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. Online Sept. 20, 2011: www.newadvent.org/cathen/07783a.htm.

9 Rogers, Nicholas. *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night.* Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 29–30.

10 Bannatyne, Leslie Pratt. *Halloween, An American Holiday, an American History.* Pelican Publishing Company, 1998, p. 9.

11 Ibid, p. 61.

12 McNeill, F. Marian. *Hallowe'en: Its Origin, Rites and Ceremonies in the Scottish Tradition.* The Albyn Press, 1970, p. 37.

13 Bannatyne, Leslie Pratt. *Halloween, An American Holiday, an American History.* Pelican Publishing Company, 1998, p. 67.

14 Ibid., p. 78.

15 Found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales,* 1837.

16 Found in *Daily News,* Kingston, Ontario, November 1, 1866.

6. Should Christians Celebrate Halloween?

Yes, but not like an unbeliever with dark and demonic symbols. Christians can truly celebrate believers who have died, for we know that "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54). And, though our bodies die, our spirits dwell with Christ (Phil. 1:23) until he returns to earth to make all things new (2 Pet. 3:13) and to clothe us with glorious bodies (Phil. 3:20–21). What a message of hope! So, though we mourn the loss of our loved ones, we do not "grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13).

In light of the history of Halloween, here are some ideas for celebrating:

- Remembering Heroes of the Faith:
  - Read stories about Christians who have demonstrated exceptional faith and courage. These stories inspire us to "live up to what we have already attained" in Christ (Phil. 3:16).
  - Encourage children to dress up like a hero of the faith. Costume choices can represent virtually every time period, every geographic area, and a wide variety of professions (even princesses and warriors).
- Remembering Our Loved Ones:
  - The Reformation emphasized that all believers are saints and citizens of heaven (see Phil. 3:20); the destination of our loved ones who died in Christ is the same as that of the "heroes of the faith." Remembering our loved ones connects our hearts to heaven in a more intimate way.
  - Explore the Scriptures to learn what they teach about the afterlife. Reflect on what your loved ones might be experiencing in heaven, and acknowledge your longing to be reunited under the perfect lordship of Jesus.
- Remembering the Lost:
  - There is a desperate need for light in our dark world, and the Bible says we are to "shine like stars in the universe as [we] hold out the word of life" to those who are perishing (Phil. 2:15b–16a). See the "Light of the World" section for creative ways to "shine" in your neighborhood.
  - Many aspects of Halloween are natural starting points for spiritual conversations: "Why do you think Halloween is such a 'dark' holiday?" "Do you believe in ghosts?" "Are you afraid of death?" Pray for opportunities to ask questions like these—that they may open a door to share the gospel!

The Light of the World: Creative Ways to "Shine" in the Darkness of Halloween.

Jesus said to believers, "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). Here are some ways that we can shine our light in the darkness of Halloween:

1. Decorate your house with the brightest lights, fill your house with music (hymns played on the harpsichord are great for Halloween), offer the best candy and attach a verse or gospel message to your treat.
2. Host a pumpkin carving party. You can draw an analogy between the carving process and what God does with our lives when we put our faith in him: Scoop out all the gunk (God removes our guilt, shame, bitterness, anger, etc.), carve a happy face (God fills us with joy), and place a candle inside (God comes to dwell in our hearts and shine through us so that we can be a light to the world).

3. Invite neighbors over for cookies or treats and post clip art (or even prepare a presentation for children) that contrasts the "scary images" of Halloween with the things of God.

Get creative with the images you select: witches vs. prophets/heroes of the faith, ghosts/skeletons vs. resurrection bodies, demon/monster costumes vs. angel costumes, creepy vs. smiling-faced jack-o-lanterns, a haunted mansion vs. the mansion that Jesus is preparing for his people.

May God help us to be light in the darkness and to find ways to creatively bring the "hallowed" back into Halloween.

For more ideas, visit www.celebratingholidays.com

ROSE PUBLISHING

© 2012 Bristol Works, Inc.
Rose Publishing, Inc.
4733 Torrance Blvd., #259
Torrance, California 90503 U S A.
All rights reserved. Printed in the USA
Email: info@rose-publishing.com
www.rose-publishing.com
Sign up for free samples

It is illegal to photocopy, post on the Internet, or reproduce this pamphlet in any way. 020914SCG

Author: Angie Mosteller, MA

ISBN-13: 978-159636-535-3
ISBN-10: 159636-535-8

Other pamphlets available from Rose Publishing:
353X Reformation Time Line
730X 24 Ways to Explain the Gospel
632X Women of the Bible: Old Testament
634X Women of the Bible: New Testament

Stock #166X Christian Origins of Halloween pamphlet
Retailers: Package of 5 pamphlets = Stock#167X (ISBN 13: 978-159636-536-0)